old fire engine gleams anew

by Vandra Huber

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Fireman Hugh T. Steele has a dream. And he's working hard to make it come true.

He's surrounded with bits and pieces of engine, completely torn apart. But it's not just any engine. It's the heart of an old 1930 Mack fire engine that for more than 20 years raced through the streets of Salt Lake.

And slowly and carefully, with the skill of a craftsman, Fireman Steele is rebuilding the engine and restoring the old truck to prime condition, so it will once again ride the streets of Salt Lake.

He said the old engine has a history of being abused. It was purchased by the city — without the approval of the fire chief — when another city refused it.

According to the story told Fireman Steele, the chief was so angry that he told the firemen to do everything possible to ruin the engine.

"And they tried," said Mr. Steele. "They used it on grass fires. Ran it to death through the fields. They used it in disasters. But it wouldn't die.

"And soon, the firemen began to like the old engine — a triple combination truck which could carry a ladder and water as well as pump the water — and began to baby it."

Despite the abuse, the engine lasted 22 years. It was last called out to pump flood water at 1300 South during the 1932 flood. Then it was junked.

It was allowed to rust and corrode until the Salt Lake City Firemen's Relief Assn. purchased the truck from a junkyard for $225.

Mr. STEELE said the association bought the old engine as a project for its members. They hoped to restore it and use it for parades. At present $2,600 and more than 3,000 hours of labor have been spent to rejuvenate the old engine.

"What began as a group project has slowly dwindled down until it's more like a personal project. I've found a whole new world in the transformation of the old engine into a new one," said Mr. Steele.

And from the condition of the engine now, the time and money have been well worth it. The corroded paint has been replaced with glossy new red. The running boards shine with fresh coats of lacquer. The aluminum tank and fixtures gleam with their old luster. Even the frayed wire has been replaced with new.

And the lettering and decoration on the truck have been hand-painted with gold leaf. Mr. Steele said the truck should be fit and ready to run for the summer parades.

It's not the only antique engine the association has rejuvenated. The firemen also are the proud owners of a 1921 America La France. This engine, a triple combination pumper, was purchased from a small community in Wyoming. The association swapped an old pumper that ran for the La France, which didn't.

The engine had been used originally in a Wyoming mining town during the big mining rush. The association spent $1,200 on it, including $600 in gold leafing. But Mr. Steele said it took only a month to rejuvenate this engine because it was in much better condition than the Mack.

The firemen also are proud of owning the old bell off the Bingham Fire Station. The bell, which began tolling out its warnings in the early 1900s, was donated by the late Salt Lake County Sheriff George Beckstead.

But despite the acquisition and restoration of two engines in two years, Mr. Steele is still not satisfied. He said the acquisitions are only the beginning of his dream. His aim is much higher.

His aim is the creation of a Utah Hall of Flame.

Fireman Steele said the museum idea has received the endorsement of the Utah Firemen's Relief Assn. Now all it needs is funding. The proposal is currently being reviewed by the legislature and the bi-centennial committee.

Mr. Steele admits that the two pieces of equipment owned by the Salt Lake association do not merit a museum. However, there are other antique engines in other communities that could be placed in the museum.

"We don't want a closed museum, but an open one where engines can be taken out and driven during parades and celebrations. We don't just want them to sit idle and rot as would happen in a normal museum. We want a home, a place for just fire engines."

Among the equipment available, should Fireman Steele's dream come true, is a 1915 ladder truck located in Logan. There are also a hand-drawn hose car in Ophir and an early 1900 Mack in South Salt Lake. Other restored engines are located in Garland, Ogden and Kearns.

"All I want is a place to show off the beautiful pieces of workmanship and preserve the beauty of the old engines for future generations," said Fireman Steele.